DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 116 CE 057 980

AUTHOR McCormick, Kathleen
TITLE Myth #14: All Literacy Problems Are the Result of Learning Disabilities.
INSTITUTION Education Writers Association, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Chicago, IL.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Collected Works - Serials (022)
JOURNAL CIT Literacy Beat; v4 n2 Apr 1991

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; Adult Literacy; *Adults; *Educational Diagnosis; *Learning Disabilities; Learning Problems; Screening Tests

ABSTRACT

Learning disabilities can be overcome although solutions are complex and costly. The range of individual disabilities is wide, and improper screening and diagnosis is common. A learning disability is a disorder affecting understanding or the use of spoken or written language. Approximately 5 percent of adults have such disabilities. In addition, as many as one-half of all literacy students could have learning disabilities. A key problem is that learning disabilities is a catch-all phrase. Basic screening of hearing and sight is critical to rule out learning disabilities. Clinical evaluation is needed to determine a learner's specific skills and possible disabilities. Literacy organizations are emphasizing more flexible teaching approaches and assessment of learning styles. Literacy experts are emphasizing a need for research on related topics. In addition, funding for adult learning disabilities staff training is needed. Efforts are underway to increase awareness of learning disabilities without turning it into the latest literacy fad. (NLA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED333116

MYTH #14: ALL LITERACY PROBLEMS ARE THE RESULT OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

The Literacy Beat

April 1991

vol. 4, no. 2

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B Messenger

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CE057580

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Literacy Beat

A special newsletter of the Education Writers Association

April 1991 vol. 4, no. 2

MYTH #14: ALL LITERACY PROBLEMS ARE THE RESULT OF LEARNING DISABILITIES.

How many illiterate adults have trouble learning to read because of learning disabilities? If this could be answered, so could a lot of other questions about adult literacy programs. To what extent are adult literacy educators aware of learning disabilities? Have they modified their programs to help adults with learning disabilities? Can volunteers truly teach those with learning disabilities? Can literacy programs help such adults if they don't have the resources to even diagnose specific problems? Does knowing you are learning disabled affect your ability to learn to read?

In spite of their own and their teachers' best efforts, many adults who persistently have trouble learning to read drop out of literacy programs, more convinced than ever that they are incapable of learning. With each such experience, they become less inclined to risk failure and less likely to learn to read. Their real problem, however, may be learning disabilities that were never diagnosed when they were students. Since the mid-1970's, federal funding has been available to diagnose and provide services for students with learning disabilities. Approximately 5% of school-age students are considered learning disabled, although some groups contend schools tend to put too many students with only mild reading problems into this category.

"Adult literacy programs now see learning disabilities as a critical component to deal with," says Peter Waite, executive director of Laubach Literacy Action (LLA), a national volunteer organization based in Syracuse, N.Y. "When you talk to students themselves, it becomes evident that many of them had significant learning disabilities that weren't addressed in school."

As more is learned about learning disabilities, literacy experts are discovering they <u>can</u> be overcome. But solutions often are complex and costly because each individual can have a unique combination of disabilities, and most literacy programs can not properly screen and diagnose them. Literacy experts are hampered by lack of knowledge, and resources to identify specific disabilities and to help adults overcome them.

The greatest challenge literacy programs face is the lack of consensus on what learning disabilities are and how much they are responsible for people not learning to read. It is clear that there is no consensus on what learning disabilities are, says Jovita Ross-Gordon, a researcher at Pennsylvania State University. (author of <u>Adults with Learning Disabilities: An Overview for the Adult Educator</u>, ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 1989.) "How the studies define learning disabilities varies", she says. "A lot of different definitions are used within the special education, adult basic education, and literacy communities."

The most commonly accepted definition of learning disabilities comes from Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which since 1978 has provided guidelines for pre-college education. The law defines a learning disability as a disorder affecting understanding or the use of spoken or written language. Such a disorder may show up as an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do math. The definition includes conditions such as brain injury or dyslexia, but it excludes learning problems resulting from physical or emotional handicaps, mental retardation, or social and economic disadvantage. Other accepted definitions, however, do include mental retardation and disorders resulting from emotional or behavioral disturbances.

<u>No Consensus</u>

Estimates of learning disabilities vary. Approximately 5 percent of adults are believed to be learning disabled, based on extrapolations from school populations, says Ross-Gordon, who is a faculty associate with the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy at Penn State. Other estimates are higher; one goes as high as 80 percent. Approximately 10 to 15 percent of the total U.S. population has some kind of learning disability, says Julie Gilligan, director of communications for the National Center for Learning Disabilities in

This edition of Literacy Beat *was researched and written by Washington area freelance writer Kathleen McCormick.*

New York City. "We know a percentage of illiterates are learning disabled, but we don't know what that [percentage] is."

"You see claims and figures bandied about, but in terms of solid research, little exists," says Ross-Gordon. What has been done on adults, she notes, has focused on college students with learning disabilities and prisoners in correctional facilities

Estimates of adults in the United States who are not functionally literate--unable to read a bus schedule, for example--range from 27 million to 60 million. Using conservative estimates, as few as 1 million or more than 3 million illiterate adults could have learning disabilities. Most literacy programs do not conduct research on learning disabilities among their students, but anecdotal information from some programs indicates that as many as one half of all literacy students may have some kind of learning disability.

"It's reasonable to assume that a higher proportion of illiterate adults are learning disabled," says Ross-Gordon. Two groups are showing up: people who because of their age have never been diagnosed as having learning disabilities, and people who went through special education and didn't learn to read in school. Younger adults who were in special education often "are the ones with the greatest skills deficits and/or learning disabilities."

Identifying problems

The new emphasis on learning disabilities is changing the way literacy programs operate. "In the past, people just continued in the process" for several months until they gave up, says Waite. "Now, we say, 'Let's stop the process and find out what the problem is '. Nine times out of ten, we find a significant learning disability." Waite estimates that of the 120,000 adults who have been enrolled in local Laubach programs, between 25 and 50 percent "either are or were learning disabled and were not diagnosed or were misdiagnosed."

A key problem is that learning disabilities "is a catch-all phrase," says Paul Kiley of the California Literacy Campaign (CLC). "We've had people come in saying, 'I'm dyslexic,' and we test them and they're not at all. They were 'diagnosed' with that when they were seven years old." Screening adult learners varies from program to program. Some literacy programs, especially those that rely heavily on volunteer lay tutors, have little or no screening that could help pinpoint problems. Others such as the CLC, the nation's largest library-based literacy program (62,000 students and 40,000 volunteers involved since 1985), use various test batteries to determine a learner's specific skills and possible disabilities.

Most literacy experts agree that some basic screening of hearing and sight is critical to rule out learning disabilities. Waite estimates that between 5 and 10 percent of all Laubach students "have had straightforward problems related to glasses, hearing aids, or other health problems," rather than complex neurological problems.

Many literacy programs are limited in identifying learning disabilities beyond using basic literacy assessments and physical tests.

Research in correctional facilities

A study of more than 1,000 male and female prison inmates in three states, found that 42 percent had some kind of learning deficiency, defined as functioning academically below the level of fifth grade. The study was conducted by Raymond Bell, a professor at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pa., in 1984 for the National Institute of Justice.

Using the Public Law 94-142 definition tests to screen for intelligence, education level, disabilities, and adaptive behavior, Bell found that the majority (82 percent) of the 42 percent with learning deficiencies had specific learning disabilities.

But the portion of inmates in his study with learning disabilities, concludes Bell, is "a gross underestimation because of informed consent and the conditions of prisons." To be in the study, inmates had to give up recreation or paid employment time, factors which he says discouraged some from participating. Only those inmates who tested below the fifth grade level were screened for learning disabilities. Also, inmates who knew they had learning disabilities probably did not choose to participate in the study because it would have forced them to acknowledge a 'weakness,' which in a tough environment could make life difficult, he says.

One of the problems is that many clients can't afford clinical evaluations, says Virginia Lawson, vice president for research and development with the Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA), which emphasizes one-to-one tutoring among its 55,000 volunteers and 50,000 students. Lawson says "severely learning disabled people need a specialist," which many local literacy programs can not afford or do not have access to.

Even with such limitations, some literacy groups are beginning to train volunteer tutors, "not to diagnose as a professional," as Lawson puts it, "but to pick up on more obvious signs of learning disabilities." An LVA national task force is developing an inservice training program for volunteers with the help of learning disability specialists who have worked with adult illiterates. Laubach hopes to train paraprofessionals to do screening, says Waite, and beyond that, to train volunteers in some diagnostic procedures.

Skeptics warn against further harm

Some adult education and literacy experts are skeptical that volunteers without professional training in learning disabilities can do any good, and that some could do harm. One danger is that inexperienced, inadequately trained teachers or tutors will identify learning disabilities where none exist. Another is that a diagnosis of learning disabilities could add additional stigma to illiteracy. "With older students, it's sometimes a relief to know they have a learning disability," explains Ross-Gordon, "but younger people often are trying to get rid of that label."

Even the idea that learning disabilities are the major reason for low skills rankles some literacy experts. Using disabilities as an excuse "doesn't take into account all the social and economic and political reasons that prevent people from learning to read," says Mike Fox of Push Literacy Action Now (PLAN) in Washington, D.C. "Maybe some of these learners went to school hungry, or had a lousy teacher or school system." Diagnoses of learning disabilities are of limited value, he says. As many as 25 percent of PLAN's learners were told they have learning disabilities, he says, "yet we haven't been able to find out specifically what that means" because evaluations are vague or school records are inaccessible.

"Connecting the learning disabilities issue in a serious way with the illiteracy problem could do what's already being done in the public schools, which dump too many kids with reading problems into special ed classes," adds Fox. "So many of those kids just need a really good reading teacher or an alternative educational system."

Fox, Kiley, and others say literacy programs focuses on problems rather than solutions. They say illiterate and learning disabled adults, like other adults, benefit from working in small groups or with tutors who respect them as able, skilled, independent learners who might need some alternative teaching techniques. They say such adults also benefit from "learner-directed learning," in which they help determine a study plan for achieving their own literacy goals, such as getting a driver's license, voting, or reading to their child, rather than following a set reading program.

Toward some solutions

Tempered by such views, LVA, Laubach, and other literacy organizations are emphasizing more flexible teaching approaches and assessment of learning styles. Helping a learning disabled student to read sometimes is as simple as using different colored paper or red or blue cellophane sheets to change the paper's light emissions. Another strategy is group tutoring, which increases interaction, collaboration, and personal responsibility for learning among even low-level students. Literacy lessons in some cases now focus more on reading about everyday, practical matters, rather than memorizing words or trying to master specific skills. In addition, literacy organizations are finding they are debating the same question that special education has wrestled with: Which is more effective, more instruction or different instruction?

"We experiment with a variety of different approaches," says Waite. "Now, it's hit or miss, which can be time-consuming and frustrating for the student and the tutor. We'd like to find strategies that work." But that takes research and training, which require resources most literacy groups do not have.

Resources and links needed

Many literacy experts want research on adults with learning disabilities. As an advisory board member of the National Center on Adult Literacy, Waite says he and others are urging the new federally funded center to do research on the subject. So far, the center, located at the University of Pennsylvania, has not selected its topics for

research. But, says Director Daniel Wagner, "We'd like to know more about it. We're open to suggestions" for projects.

Another need is money for staff training and development. Funding for learning disabilities in the past "has been directed to K-12 education, and those people and the adult education and literacy program people have never had an opportunity to meet," says Kiley. Solutions require adjustments in funding, he says, so that adult literacy programs become eligible for special education funds; and health, social service, and other agencies "realize that if we help these clients, we help your agency, also."

William Langner of the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Office of Vocational and Adult Education says help already is available but that most literacy programs aren't aware of it. Community colleges, for example, "have the resources and trained staff to diagnose and teach learning disabled adults," he says. And government-funded vocational rehabilitation programs for people seeking employment also can provide or refer low-income adults for help.

Other efforts are underway to increase awareness. Among the most promising is one organized by Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS), co-produced by ABC/PBS television. PLUS is working with some 20 national organizations involved in literacy and learning disabilities to "act as a catalyst for groups in the local community to work together," says Margot Woodwell, PLUS project director and general manager of WQED in Pittsburgh. PLUS plans to publish a report in April of successful local collaborations between literacy and learning disabilities programs and later will produce a video and newsletters to provide information on training, teaching techniques, and other aspects of identifying and helping learning disabled, illiterate adults.

But she and others also urge increasing awareness of the issue without turning it into the latest literacy fad. They warn that one danger is that learning disabilities may become the next buzzword in the literacy movement, which could create expectations of rapid and significant improvements in literacy levels--and allow excuses for why some adults fail to learn to read.

RESOURCES

Paul Kiley
California Literacy Coalition
California State Library
1001 Sixth St.
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 445-4027

Jovita Ross-Gordon
Adult Education Program
The Pennsylvania State University
403 S. Allen St., Suite 206
University Park, PA 16801
(814) 863-3781

Peter Waite
Laubach Literacy Action
1320 Jamesville Ave., Box 131
Syracuse, NY 13210
(315) 422-9121

Learning Disabilities Assn. of America
(formerly the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities)
4156 Library Rd.
Pittsburgh, PA 15234
(412) 341-1515

Virginia Lawson
Literacy Volunteers of America
5795 Widewaters Parkway
Syracuse, NY 13214
(315) 445-8000

Daniel Wagner
National Center on Adult Literacy
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216
(215) 898-2100

Margot Woodwell
Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS)
National Media Outreach Center
4802 Fifth Ave.
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 622-1491

Mike Fox
Push Literacy Action Now (PLAN)
1332 G St., SE
Washington, DC 20003

William Langner
U.S. Department of Education
Division of Adult Education and Literacy
400 Maryland Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20202-7240
(202) 732-2410

The Literacy Beat *is a publication of the Education Writers Association, produced under a grant from the MacArthur Foundation. Questions should be addressed to Lisa Walker or Anne Lewis at EWA, 1001 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036; (202) 429-9680; FAX (202) 872-4050.*